

7 The Lattice

What happens at such a time? When finest dust sifts and those who walk through it in blinding light become hectic, burnished stick figures. Verna was brewing herbal tea, scolding herself for making a double portion. At first she thought she gazed through her kitchen window at a far, crooked cactus, but it moved.

When the figure got closer, it darkened and slowed extraordinarily, looking like something trapped under an emulsion. Squinting somehow brought it back to her vision: an Indian carrying a rolled-up army cot.

"Hey white woman!" it screamed. "Old priest told me to come, that you'd have a tea for me."

She opened the window and the dust spun in. "I'll give you a tea, but then you go away."

"I got nowheres to go! I been everywhere and everybody hates me."

"I can believe that. Besides, this tea is not like booze, it's medicine."

"They told me at the big university hospital I got the

big C. And I got it everywhere. The old priest said you would have a tea ready for me to take away the pain. I hurt so much I ain't no more drunken Indian!" He staggered as if to dodge something trying to crush him.

"This tea will help. Come onto the porch." And thus did Chuckie Charlie meet Verna. Chuckie, the tribe's biggest scandal: drugs, alcohol, jail terms, even a murder conviction."

"I knew you were Chuckie Charlie," she finally stated on the porch, nearly choking in the fiery dust. "I couldn't even see you in all the dust and I knew that. They say you're utterly no good!"

"They're right. But Chuckie Charlie, he put steel in bridge and buildings all over the world!"

"And murdered a man in there somewhere."

"No. No murder. Chuckie Charlie, he fight with other drunk Indians on balcony in a movie place, New York state. He and another stupid one fall off. This other Indian die and Chuckie Charlie smash his own head but not enough for sense, for sober. Jury say he kill other Indian. But judge say he only give ten years about such a mess. Because, like all Indians are crazy, you know? White man do such awful things to make him crazy, and then blame him for being crazy!"

"Okay, so you're not that bad then, right?"

"I'm worse. But what the hell, I'm dying, Woman. Cancer!"

"I'm willing to take your word for that. You sure look like hell!"

"I'm here to help you. Keep your place clean. Do any damn thing you want."

"Another promise, Chuckie Charlie?"

"I broke all the ones before, White Woman. But this is last. Maybe you give me tea, and I feel better, but then I join The Great Spirit. He will ask, 'who was last one kind to you?'-- people don't know that's first question."

Before Verna could respond, he collapsed on the porch. She drank her portion of the tea and listened to Mozart on her windup record player until she heard him stir. He was coated with dust and shivering, heaving dry. Verna set up the cot and sat next to him as he sipped the tea. She strangely warmed to him, not a romantic stirring, but the recognition of both their fates.

"Maybe it's an irony that I tell the biggest bum in the tribe first, but I'm through too, Chuckie. Breast cancer. What's the difference? Everyone will know soon enough. At the university hospital they want to give me poisons I wouldn't stock in my pharmacy. My herbs are as good. Nothing will work, but my herbs don't make you sicker. At any rate, if you help you can stay. If you're a pain in the ass, I'll get both the tribal constable and the Anglo sheriff."

"You don't need nobody 'cause I'll help you. White Woman. You will get weak but I'll stay strong!"

"It's almost funny. You can hardly stand." Which proved true for he stood up and fell back onto the cot.

"The Great Spirit will hold me up till you die. Maybe we die together, White Woman."

"Well...no one else is here. I'll bring you blankets. You sleep here on the porch. And tomorrow you better get all the dust out of my inside rooms. All my bottles are dusty and I just run out of gas every afternoon now. That's when I did my housekeeping."

"No more housekeeping for you!"

"And yet another promise, Chuckie Charlie?"

"Promise of a dead man must be good."

"I'll be home from the hospital at five. You'll either stay or be out on your useless ass!"

So began their pact. Based on almost nothing, in a way.

As if we reach the lonely place where fatal lines converge, and a stranger climbs the lattice to pass the fatal time with us.

One morning Chuckie Charlie found a herb in the canyon-- bright purple with yellow stripes. Verna couldn't find it in her

books, but Chuckie Charlie knew that Indians called it Twilight Ghost, a reputed tonic.

She ground it and they took it mixed with water. She filled two marbled theme books with her notes, asking Chuckie Charlie a series of questions every evening. In a sketch book, she painstakingly drew it in colored inks. Verna sent a sample of the powder and a small sprig of the plant to an acquaintance at the Botany Department of the university—after failing to get it to germinate in a broken cup on her windowsill. He immediately passed it to a drug company researcher he knew. During the many years it took to synthesize, its nickname in the lab was Infuriating Verna. Finally they succeeded and the drug, a valid treatment for some unique cancers, is named Inverna-F.

It had provided Verna and Chuckie Charlie with a few month's remission. They went to the canyon every evening and sat for hours bundled together in chill moonlight.